



LA CULTURA Y LA CIUDAD

JUAN CALATRAVA
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(eds.)

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Y
LA CIUDAD

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ON A CITY ON THE ARCHIPELAGO

CHIARA MONTERUMISI

«My eyes are hence on this city: this is how and, in my specific case, why. Space —here, more than in other place— is aware of its inferiority to time, so that it stands up through the only feature that time does not possess: beauty»¹.

It is from this quotation from Russian literato Brodskij concerning Venice, that my paper examines how the leading exponent of the National-Romanticism² Ragnar Östberg (1866-1945) contributed to conferring a proper national character on Stockholm's *imago* at the turn of the 19th century.

The «last hero» of the *Norden*³ claims our attention not only because he wanted to re-found Swedish architecture against the «cosmopolitan»⁴ mentality that marks so many *fin de siècle* experiments scattered around the city, but also because he was actually able to express a personal idiom embodying a marked local character through a process of «purification from the past,» as the Swedish art historian Gregor Paulsson (1889-1977) said⁵.

So far Stockholm had been akin to a «young girl drawing inspiration mimetically from various foreign outposts, revealing a chameleon approach»⁶. Östberg was not a lone voice in criticizing the European state of architecture, since the 18th century and the first decades

1. Iosif Brodskij, *Fondamenta degli Incurabili*, Milan, Adelphi, 1991, pp. 40-41.

2. The definition «National Romanticism» was employed by the Swedish art historian Johnny August Emanuel Roosval and other Swedish scholars in the 1920s to emphasize the fantastic element in the experience of architects such as Ragnar Östberg, Torben. Grut (1871-1945), Carl. Westman (1866-1936) and Lars Israel Wahlman (1870-1952). See Johnny Roosval, *Modern Architecture*, in *Swedish Art: being the Kahn Lectures for 1929*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1932, pp. 70-77.

3. *Norden* is a Scandinavian term, used in the same way in the Northern Germanic languages, literally meaning «the North(ern lands)». It is hence synonymous with the definition «the Nordic countries», that include Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland. Whereas «Scandinavia» refers only to cultural and linguistic groups formed by the three monarchies of Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden and Norway). The epithet «last hero of the North» coined by Ortelli is here geographically broadened by substituting «North» with the more suitable «Norden». See Luca Ortelli, *Ragnar Östberg: Municipio di Stoccolma*, Milano, Electa, 1990.

4. See Ragnar Östberg, «Contemporary Swedish Architecture», *Architectural Record*, 3, 1909.

5. See Gregor Paulsson, «Ragnar Östberg. 50 år», *Stockholm Dagblad*, 13 July 1916 («Ragnar Östberg. 50th birthday»).

6. The architect outlined the condition of architecture at that time, giving many examples in this evocative lecture. See *Stockholmsarkitekturen och våra moderna arkitektur*, Stockholm, Nilsson & Berglings, 1901 (Eng. trans. *Architecture in Stockholm and our modern architects*)

of the following coincided with a period of social and cultural conflict. Muthesius aptly defined those years as «artistic chaos»⁷.

What the Swedish master did was almost an epic labour, calling to mind some of C. G. Verner von Heidenstam's epic works (1859-1940)⁸.

A sincere devotion to the wild landscapes of the severe and unwelcoming North, as well as nostalgia for the heroic Middle Ages resounded in Sweden's intellectual and artistic milieus at that time. The national romantic atmosphere condensed national feeling and a quest for those Nordic *topoi* that expressed the *genius loci*.

During the last quarter of the 19th century massive industrialization and nationalistic sentiment had progressively spread throughout the Scandinavian countries, arousing a desire for nationhood which owed something to the still undefined boundaries of these nations. The heart of the matter was to preserve local culture, traditions and values. Stressing national identity was a linchpin of their credo of individual freedom, social harmony and symbiosis with the natural *habitus*⁹.

Stockholm hence embodies «a part of Sweden», condensed in the figure of speech known as synecdoche. Indeed, this oldest city of the Swedish kingdom, situated where Baltic Sea and Lake *Mälaren*¹⁰ join hands, is a microcosm of the wider Scandinavian peninsula.

The Swedish capital, once a provincial city on the fringe of Europe, rapidly became a metropolis of the North. It hence called for new urban plans shaping its appearance and structure. The first of these was the *Lindhagenplanen* (Lindhagen's urban plan, 1866), which clearly resembled Hausmann's rigidly monumental renovation plan for Paris. But this urban plan proved at once not to interpret that fragmented, floating and far from geometric space that is the archipelago around Stockholm.

By contrast, the national romantic architects were not interested in a global urban design, but focused on specific points of the city, applying an urban plan concept similar to the *renovatio urbis* used in Venice under Doge Gritti or in Rome during Julius II's papacy. Re-designing the city structure by simply designing «part of the city» was a way to enhance the entire city, through projects limited in terms of space and scope¹¹. This approach was mostly due to the topographical features that distinguished it from other European cities: being scattered on the islands of an archipelago. During the centuries canals and docks had been re-designed for practical reasons directly connected with the layout of the city. Thus,

7. See Hermann Muthesius, *Stilarchitektur und Baukunst*, Mühheim-Ruhr, Verlag von Kann Schimmelpfeng, 1902, p. 13.

8. The comparison between Östberg's architectural output and the contemporary epic literature by Heidenstam was substantially stressed by many critics. See Ragnar Josephson, «Stockholm Stadshus», *Ord och bild*, 1923, p. 344 (Stockholm Town Hall) and Hakon Ahlberg, «Ragnar Östberg på avstånd», *Arkitektur*, 7, 1965, p. 235 («Ragnar Östberg at a distance»).

9. Here, the *habitus* concept is taken from the studies conducted by French sociologist-philosopher Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), who considers humans as able to interiorize the dominant culture in such a way as to reproduce it. See *The logic of practice*, Cambridge, Polity press, 1990, p. 54.

10. *Lake Mälaren* is the third largest lake in Sweden. Basically, it is the continuation of Baltic waters inside the peninsula.

11. See Bernardo Secchi, *Di cosa parliamo quando parliamo di urbanistica*, Rome, Meltemi editore, 2006, p. 235.

in the essay *Holmen* (islands)¹² Östberg stressed the importance of preserving the original natural character of the *Staden vid vatten* or *Staden inom broarna* (City on the water or City of the bridges) as the Swedish capital was historically named. Besides, ancient iconography had always depicted the core of the city as three granite islands —*Gamla Stan, Riddarholmen and Skepsholmen*— and some vertical elements like bell towers or castle towers.

Clearly, Stockholm would become a testing ground for the application of our national romanticist's architectural theories. But how did this new way of thinking about architecture take shape? What repertoire of images and scenes went to form Östberg's personal «spiritual family»¹³, which would accompany his own subsequent output?

Travelling fed the master's imagination, supplied him with pages of sketches and notes on that Mediterranean culture which would later cool in northern waters and waft like a «shade or aura»¹⁴ along the Stockholm streets, as suggested by Paul Clemen (1866-1947) during the Stockholm Town Hall inauguration speech (23rd July 1923).

By the time he came home Östberg's design process became manifest: from *imagination passive* in the form of studies and select references, to *imagination active* capable of assembling and combining inputs.

This paper sets out on another voyage, one of discovery among references explicit, yet subtly concealed. Our focus will be on specific instances of Östberg's artworks —the *Stockholms Stadshuset* (Stockholm Town Hall) as well as its never-to-be realized nearby part, the *Stockholms Nämndhuset* (Administration Building) and the *villa Geber*— and their connection with the overall town plan for the Queen of *Lake Mälaren*¹⁵. The first of these is bound up with the designing of the *Stadshuset* and Östberg's many proposals for it, stretching from 1909 to 1940, since he kept on thinking about this project many years after the City Hall was finished (1901-1923). *Villa Geber*, on the other hand, was built in the space of two years (1911-1913), at a time when the architect was taking some important decisions for the City Hall.

The two projects exemplify national romanticism's approach to design, and as such they inevitably oscillate between seeking the «spirit of the locus» and harking back to local and foreign forms of the traditional urban landscape. For instance, Sitte's *Raumkunst* theories (1889) greatly influenced the Nordic reality as did H. J. Stübber's treatise (1890). From them Östberg reinterpreted the place as a set of separate spatial sequences forged from his

12. See Ragnar Östberg, «Holmen», in *En arkitekt anteckningar med bilder och verk av författaren*, Stockholm, Bokförlaget Natur och Kultur, 1928, pp. 192-202 (*Architect's notes. Images and projects*).

13. Henri Focillon coined the poetical expression, *spiritual family*, to express that repertoire of references that every artist builds for himself and constantly draws on. See *Vita delle forme*, Einaudi, Turin, 1990. (orig. ed. *Vie des formes*, 1934).

14. The definition of «shades from a repertoire journey» was pronounced by German art historian Paul Clemen referring to Stockholm City Hall. See «Das Stadshaus zu Stockholm und die europäischen Monumentalbauten in alter und neuer Zeit», in *Stockholms stadshus vid dess invigning midsommarafton 1923*, AB G. Tisells tekn. Förlag, Stockholm, 1923, pp. 134-144

The inauguration date corresponded with the fourth centenary of Gustav Vasa's triumphal entry into Stockholm after liberating the Swedish citizens from Danish domination. Celebrating the splendours of Swedish history was a way to feed the literati, artists and architects' image store.

15. A historical and mythical appellation of Stockholm.

many memories of collective spaces and urban voids, and obviously making allowance for differences in terms of project scale.

One might consider the already mentioned concept of *genius loci* to be far from the Nordic mentality, since the origin of this term lay in the Latin world. Yet all cultures and religions have always had mythical or pagan spirits akin to that concept embodying the human search for identity in natural places. As C. N. Schulz¹⁶ said, the *locus* represents a portion of reality that belongs to architecture: it is a concrete representation of human living, the identity of which depends on belonging to a *locus*. The city has always been a metaphor of human existence, a place of memories, and as such it forms the backdrop for our two case-studies. As Rossi writes, there is a close connection between architecture and its location; it becomes an artefact of its space and its time, of its topographical dimension and its form¹⁷.

The projects I have investigated embody two dimensions of living: urbanity with the municipal centre, and domesticity with the partly isolated villa. They are also situated in opposite areas of Stockholm's expansion: the first on the furthestmost portion of *Kungsholmen*, the western peninsula, and the second one along the banks of the eastern *Djurgård* canal. The «people's house» and the *private house* are two sides of the same coin, that was the process of re-founding the language of Swedish architecture and giving a new appearance to the capital, clearly expressed in Alberti's well-known nutshell definition.¹⁸

The city and urban space have always been the forum of collective living, for which reason public building is the platform of public living. By contrast, the house has always been that private shelter in which a single person can flourish.

Deep down, the purpose of a city has always been to present a proper image of itself, but this can only be achieved through assembling and combining those permanent and changeable elements that have gone to form the urban landscape. In this sense, we can consider past iconographic representations as a glorification of those periods of splendour, though they also encapsulated an evocative idea about how the city was built. The artistic genre of «painted architecture» is none other than an expressive way of looking at and thinking about the city. In the specific case of Stockholm, the remarkable book of architectural engravings documenting Sweden's imperial greatness —*Suecia antiqua et hodierna* (1698-1703)— drawn by the Swedish engineer Erik Dahlberg was not a mere object to be aesthetically contemplated, but an operative way of penetrating the real nature of the Nordic city on its islands.

Stockholm has to be interpreted as an «interrupted continuity»¹⁹, like its sibling lagoon city: Venice. More than a repertoire of images, the latter was a «real wonderland for Nordic architects» as Persico described²⁰.

Venice has never been represented as a city designed according to classical principles of composition like Florence or Rome, but expresses an open form immersed in time and the lagoon.

16. See Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius loci. Paesaggio, ambiente, architettura*, Milan, Electa, 1979. (orig. ed. *Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, 1979).

17. See Aldo Rossi, «Il locus», in *L'architettura della città* (1966), Turin, Città Studi Edizioni, 1995, pp. 139-140.

18. See Leon Battista Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, libro I, cap. IX, Milan, Polifilo, 1966.

19. Sergio Bettini, «Introduzione», in *Venezia nascita di una città*, Milan, Electa, 1988, p. 9.

20. See Edoardo Persico, «La cooperativa Foerbundet», *Casabella*, 92, 1935, p. 18.

Stockholm has often been called «the Venice of the North», but only around the turn of the 20th century did this become a fact. Historically, the expression had obvious roots in the similar geography of the two cities. The definition has not been uniquely used of Stockholm, but has been attributed to various cities in Northern Europe. Cities with evident analogies of topography, where Venice and its almost mythical origins may have cast their influence. Unfortunately, the real nature of these two cities has been progressively concealed by those mythical descriptions which only refer to surface similarities.

Let us turn to that definition and trace its origin. The Swedish humanist and Catholic archbishop Olaus Magnus first made this comparison in geographical terms. He often celebrated Nordic countries and traditions and the erection of a real capital city during the Renaissance. For instance, in the Latin treatise *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (1555)²¹ he mentioned similarities of construction techniques, such as timber piles. After him, the German humanist and cartographer Jakob Ziegler in his geographical treatise, *Quae intus continentur Syria, Palestina, Arabia, Aegyptus, Schondia, Holmiae civitatis* (1532) described the archipelago nature of Stockholm where the salt lake embraces the islands. Later still, Erik Dahlberg again likened Stockholm to Venice in his *Suecia antiqua et hodierna*. This definition spread to travel guides such as the famous *Baedeker (Schweden und Norwegen, 1878)*. All these comments fed the cliché of the Nordens Venedig, so that it reached far beyond Sweden's borders. Take the great exhibition, for example, *Konstindustriutställingen* (the Industrial Art Exhibition, 1909) set in Stockholm, where the concept in tourist terms was launched worldwide. On the occasion of that international exhibition it became popular to send postcards in which gondolas plied across *Lake Mälaren*. Thus, the noble comparison between these two cities has tended to a quite superficial analogy.

Besides tracing the origins of the definition, one wonders: how did Venice come to form a reference for Swedish architects, especially those belonging to the National Romanticism movement?

Stockholm and Venice require to be interpreted as units composed of natural and man-made elements, making it essential we investigate our two case-studies without severing these «parts of the city» from the urban backdrop, which would make any global outlook impossible.

The different-scale projects presented here finally clarify the parallel with the lagoon city *par excellence*. In these public and domestic buildings Östberg manages to capture and condense a series of fragments of Venice. During the heated debate over designing the new Stockholm the review *Arkitektur* carried articles by promising pupils —E.G. Asplund and C. Johansson— in which Venice was mentioned as a model, so the master was clearly not a lone voice²².

Floating down the Canal Grande, the paper explores those architectural sources of reference that inspired him: the Rialto Bridge and Piazza San Marco, Fabbriche Nuove and Procuratie Nuove, the Palazzo Ducale and Venetian palaces. Again, the visual interplay

21. The Swedish archbishop was a key figure, indeed king Gustavus Vasa appointed him to the legation for the archbishop designation in Rome. After the Reformation, he remained in self-imposed exile and took an active part in the Council of Trent.

22. The Swedish debate circulated thanks this magazine, of which Östberg was director in his time (1908-1912). See their contributions to *Arkitektur*, 49, 1919, p. 76 and pp. 107-108.

between the City Hall-Administration Building and *Riddarholmen* island in Stockholm's historical heart is definitely similar to the relation between the island of San Giorgio and the San Marco complex. In both cases, it is evident how water and rivers become public spaces, more appropriately named «urban facts», that visually and spatially dialogue.

They encapsulate the synthetic method implied in the «analogous city» where imagination and design combine in a search for the «reality» and the «myth» of a city, which is to say, where myth concretely affects the city.²³

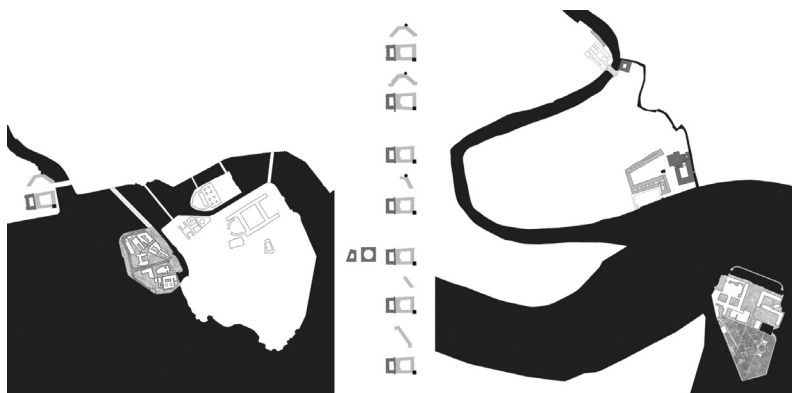
Östberg's legacy is not immutable and rigid, it is still capable of being transformed as is any analogical design method. Stockholm itself shares in this *in fieri* tendency, since it cannot be seen as closed in form, any more than Venice. The morphological reasons behind these two cities lie in something barely intelligible, something that fades away in the haze of their myths and fairy-tales.

»Venice has become an idea, an illusion yet is also a real place bathed by the Adriatic. A depiction of reality as well as reality itself, sometimes tending to blend together or react against one another. Venice and that other Venice stand side by side or inside each other. But each is vital to the other, neither can survive alone, both are Venice» and Stockholm, «image and simulacrum, history and myth.»

23. See Ezio Bonfanti, «Immagine della città analoga», in Marco Biraghi and Michelangelo Sabatino (eds.), *Nuovo e moderno in architettura*, Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 2001, p. 356.



(Above) Heinrich Neuhaus, *Panorama över Stockholm*, lithography, 1870.
(Source: *Panorama över Stockholm på 1870-talet*, Stockholm,
Generalstabens litogr. Anst., 1954).
(Below) *Interpretative drawing about the state of Stockholm in 1923*.
(Source: Author's drawing)



Analogous comparison between Stockholm and Venice: the “water squares”, visual relationship with facing island and architectural topoi. (Source: Author's drawing)



Villa Geber: a Venetian palace along the fresh lake Mälaren. (Source: Author's drawing)